

Revisiting a Subversive Mexican Art Collective and the Country's Forgotten Crimes

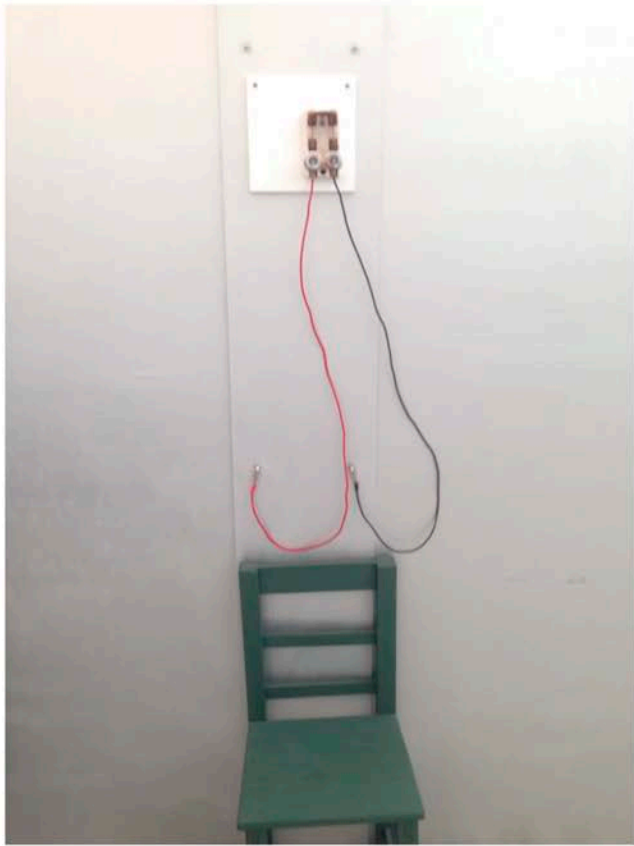
by **Jeff Peer** on February 12, 2016



Installation view of 'Proceso Pentágono Group' at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

MEXICO CITY — At first glance, the room seems innocuous. There is a desk with a wallet, a purse, and some empty bottles, an army-green shirt on a hanger, some shelves, and a few chairs. Upon looking more closely, however, one sees disquieting things: disembodied fingers and ears, scalpels, bullets, a fist making a Black Power salute, a map of Mexico drawn in bright red with a black number one superimposed over it. A chair sits beneath an exposed electrical outlet from which two sinister wires dangle down. The freestanding installation, built in the shape of a pentagon, is meant to recall a torture chamber. The exterior is decorated with stylized military maps and a frightening, human-shaped bundle of black plastic lies nearby. For the artists of the subversive Mexican art collective known as Grupo Proceso Pentágono that brought this installation, titled "Pentágono," to the 1977 Paris Biennale, the Americas seemed like a torture chamber, and, in the artists' eyes, it was built in

the shape of US foreign policy.



Installation view of Grupo Proceso Pentágono's
"Pentágono" at MUAC

The **retrospective** of works by Grupo Proceso Pentágono, on display at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City, addresses a gap in our historical memory. Investigations of the period known in Mexico as *la guerra sucia*, or the dirty war, did not begin until the **Institutional Revolutionary Party** (PRI) lost power in 2000, and the story remains largely forgotten. During the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, the Mexican government violently repressed a series of protest movements, killing students and activists, and striking railroad workers. Many Mexican dissident groups decided to take up arms, and the government responded with forced disappearances, arrests of family members, and torture of men, women, guerrillas, and those suspected of supporting them. In 1968, on the eve of the Olympics, the Mexican army **killed several hundreds** of student protestors in Mexico City. In 1971, a paramilitary group affiliated with the government perpetrated another student massacre in the capital. These crimes went unpunished, and mostly unmentioned. But it is hard to imagine a more strident, dramatic denunciation than the collection of works on display by Grupo Proceso Pentágono, active from 1976–1985, who turned their art into political intervention.

They were one of a number of art collectives active during the 1970s and '80s in Mexico, a movement now called *los grupos*. Though *los grupos* are not remembered very often today, the show at MUAC makes a strong case for their importance in the development of conceptual and political art in Latin America and beyond. It also makes for a frightening history lesson.



Grupo Proceso Pentágono (click to enlarge)

Proceso Pentágono was formed after the Peruvian art critic Juan Acha convened a group of about 15 young artists in a tiny town outside of Mexico City, for an event called, grandiosely, the Symposium of Zacualpan. Among the revelers were three young painters who had been exhibiting together since 1969, Carlos Finck, José Antonio, and Victor Muñoz, as well as an artist who had decided to leave Mexico after the massacre in 1968, Felipe Ehrenberg. These four, inspired by Acha's notion of *arte no-objetual*, or non-object art, formed the core of Proceso Pentágono. The fifth point of the pentagon was reserved for chance.

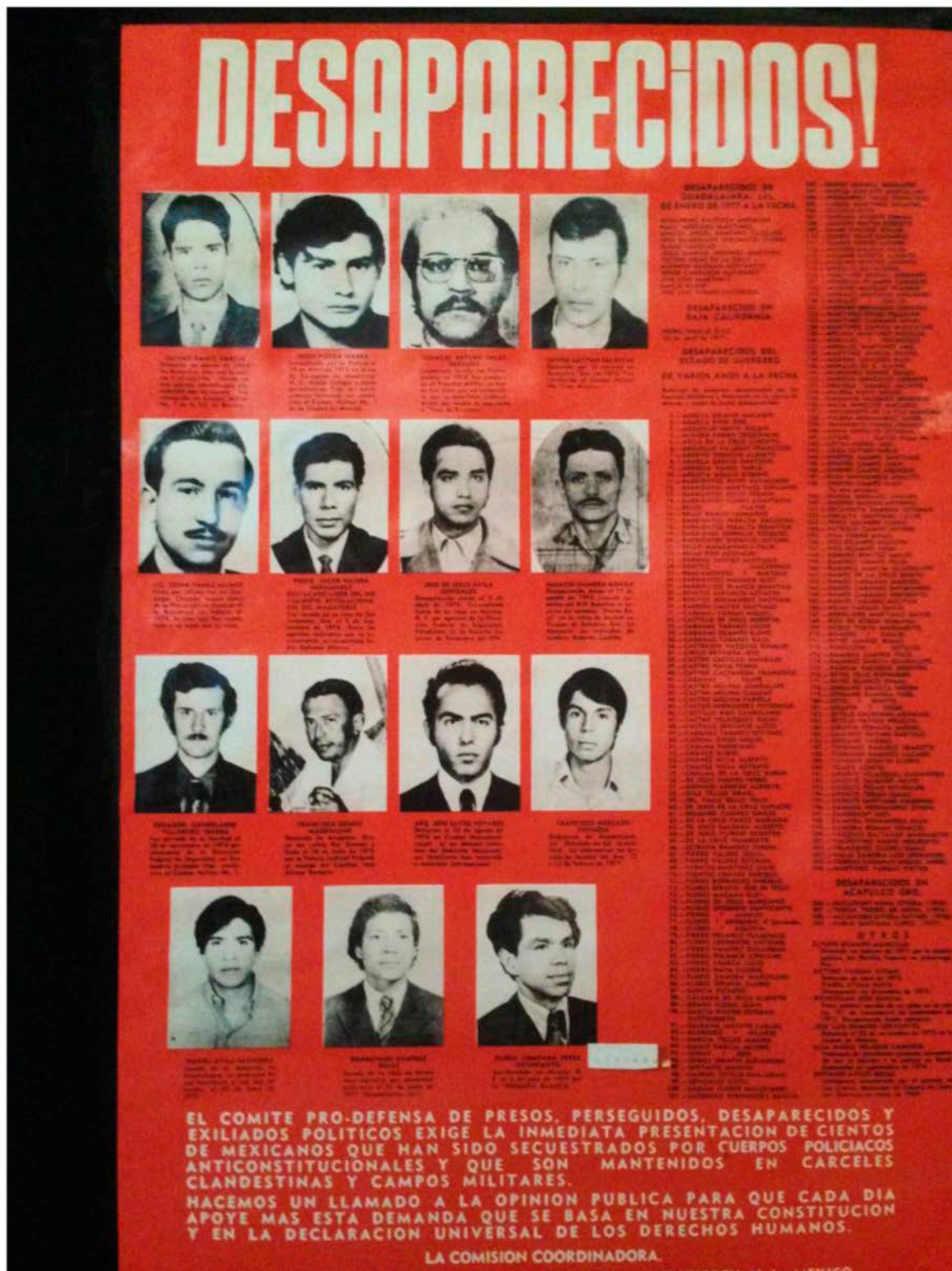
The group would incorporate many more members before disbanding nine years later. Their work included everything from staged public kidnappings and simulated acts of violence, to political posters and *mise-en-scènes* like "Pentágono." They developed original practices, debated ideas, and developed their projects by committee. In 1979, they opened an art space, offering exhibitions, exchanges, public lectures, workshops, and film screenings. According to the retrospective, "The *Centro Proceso Pentágono* became a hub for the network of artist collectives" active in Mexico at the time. It became the headquarters of a movement.



Installation view of 'Proceso Pentágono Group'

Replicas of some of Proceso Pentágono's most important works are on display at MUAC. One piece from 1979, "1929: Proceso," a reference to the 50th anniversary of the founding of Mexico's ruling political party, recreates a police-station torture center. At the door, posters show photos of *desaparecidos*. The viewer walks through several very disturbing rooms — coming across surveys with questions about real cases that reveal who was abducted where, when, and by whom — before finding a trove of testimonies written by victims who were tortured by government forces.

In 1980, Proceso Pentágono submitted a very different sort of piece to a painting competition held by Bellas Artes, the official Mexican government arts institute. In the Palacio de Bellas Artes, the group presented an object created during a performance: in "Let's Make A Painting," José Antonio was violently wrapped in a curtain, bound, dragged, and painted. The curtain was then tied to a frame and embellished with a small depiction of the scene, the victim's body lying bound and prostrate.

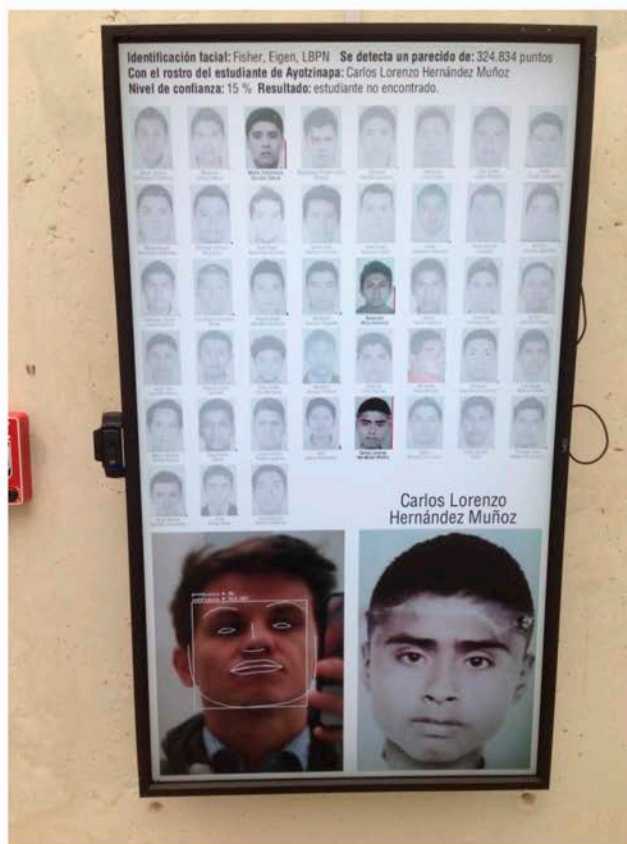


A poster revealing photos of the 'desaparecidos'

Seen out of their historical context, these works can seem heavy-handed and obvious, lacking in

spontaneity and subtlety. They look a bit like art made by a committee. But they remain eerily relevant. Grupo Proceso Pentágono has reconvened again and again since it disbanded. In 1997, they **built a mock graveyard** in the middle of the Zócalo — the cultural and political heart of the Mexican capital — to protest the massacre of 47 indigenous men, women, and children in Acteal, Chiapas. In 2015, the group created a video installation in response to the disappearance of the **43 normalistas from Ayotzinapa**, protesting “the permanence of the conditions of violence, repression and silence that have persisted in Mexico for decades.”

One of the group’s old posters caught my eye. It was made for a conference in 1983 of the “Latin American Federation of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared.” I recognized the slogan: “¡Vivos los llevaron! Vivos los queremos!” (“They took them alive! We want them alive!”) The protestors for the missing Ayotzinapa students are demanding the same thing as Grupo Proceso Pentágono back in 1983.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, “Level of Confidence” (2015) at MUAC ([click to enlarge](#))

On my way out, I walked through an exhibition of **works** by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Piece after piece reverberated with political implications. By the front door, I passed one that reminded me of those posters from the 1970s. In “Level of Confidence” (2015), a screen displayed the faces of the missing Ayotzinapa students. Facial recognition software matched my face with the face of the missing student whom I most resemble. The young man’s name was Carlos Lorenzo Hernández Muñoz.

Later, on my way home, I read about Carlos on the internet. He was 19 years old two Septembers ago. He liked to play soccer and he was usually the goalie.

Perhaps the crimes of the 1970s and '80s are now history. Perhaps they have been mostly forgotten, along with the artists who made art in protest against them. But the legacy of that art is still alive and well, and there seems to be just as much a need for it as ever.

Proceso Pentágono Group continues at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) (Av. de Los Insurgentes sur No. 3000, Coyoacán, Mexico City) through February 21.